

1916

Old Home Week Souvenir
of Mexico, N. Y.



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*“Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never bro’t to mind?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days of auld lang syne?”*



EYE VIEW OF MEXICO, N. Y.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

THE history of the town of Mexico is veiled in the mists of romance. When the powerful confederacy of Indians, known as the Iroquois, migrated from the north into Central New York, two of its members, the tribes of the Oneidas and of the Onondagas, acquired the territory included in the original town of Mexico. This was held as a hunting and fishing ground until the Indians ceded it on March 1, 1788, to the State of New York.

The first white man to visit our town was the great French explorer, Samuel de Champlain. In 1609 he founded Quebec and formed an alliance with the Indians of the North. With these allies, in 1616, he went on a tour of exploration into the country of the Hurons and traveled westward from the Ottawa River to the great fresh water sea, which took its name from these Hurons. Returning from this expedition he discovered a lake which the Indians called Ontario, or the "Beautiful" lake. Crossing the eastern end of this lake from some point near the present site of Kingston, Ontario, he probably landed at the mouth of the Salmon River which the Indians called "Ga-hen-wa-ga," and which the French afterward called the "La Famine River." The map which he has drawn of this locality, however, makes it uncertain as to the exact spot of landing, but it is possible that he first touched the borders of our town near the mouth of the Big Sandy Creek. Following the shore of the lake for about four leagues, Champlain and his followers crossed a stream whose banks were bordered with chestnut trees. Its description



MEXICO COUNTY HOUSE, MEXICO, N. Y.

leads us to believe that it may have been our Salmon Creek. From here on he boldly pushed his way southward through the forest until he reached a stockaded fort of the Onondagas, at a place nine miles south of Oneida Lake, where he fought a spirited battle with the Indians, but was repulsed. It is, therefore, quite certain that he and his followers crossed and recrossed the town of Mexico.

After Champlain's time, many parties of French and Indians, in their journeys from the St. Lawrence country to Central New York, visited our town. For more than a century, the French were in constant contact with the hostile Iroquois Confederacy. In 1684 De LaBarre, Governor-General of Canada, with 500 rangers and 300 Indians, encamped at La Famine, where he held a great conference with the Senecas. Again in 1720 Father Pierre Xavier Charlevoix writes of being stormbound at La Famine. Along the Indian trails and waterways of the town, the black-robed Jesuit Fathers passed to and fro, on their visits to the Onondaga villages. The heroic Jesuit Fathers, LeMoyne and Jogue, must have been among this number, for their names are closely associated with the efforts of the Jesuit Missionaries to Christianize the Iroquois. No permanent settlements, however, were made in the town until some years after the Revolution. Up to the last decade of the eighteenth century the entire region was an unbroken wilderness, inhabited only by wild animals and wandering Indians and, occasionally, a white trapper. In 1791, the State of New York sold to John and Nicholas Roosevelt a large tract of land at an average price of thirty-nine cents an acre. In 1792, they in turn sold from this tract of land five hundred thousand acres to George Frederick William Augustus Scriba, a merchant of New York, of Dutch descent. This tract embraced most of the present town of Mexico,



D HOUSE

and in 1794 received the name of "Scriba's Patent". Scriba endeavored to settle this land patent and had it surveyed by one Benjamin Wright. He offered farms to the first settlers without an advance in money or rent upon their agreement to clear four acres of land each year. Between 1792 and 1797 several settlers located in the town under such contracts with Scriba. They soon found, however, that it was difficult to clear four acres yearly and all gave up their farms. The records of these early settlers were carried away with them to Watertown, but were lost on the way. Some of their names are known by the names of the farms they vacated. In our part of the original town of Mexico we find the names of Buckingham, Stanley, Gove, Baron, Adams and others. Most of these were located near the present site of Colosse.

Scriba had ambitious plans for his possessions. In 1795 he built a highway through the wilderness, from a settlement which he called Rotterdam, which is now the present village of Constantia, to Vera Cruz, which is now Mexico Point. This is the road which crosses the Maple View highway at the top of Prattham Hill; soon afterward a highway was built following the beach from Mexico Point to Oswego. Scriba's agent, Wright, settled at Mexico Point in 1796 and surveyed and laid out city lots as far south as Texas. Two years later, it is estimated there were about twenty-five families in the whole town.

Mexico has been well called the mother of towns because it is not only the oldest town in Oswego County, but also because at the time of this organization it included a great deal of the surrounding territory. It was first chartered by the Legislature on April 10, 1792, and was formed from Whitestown in Herkimer County. It included at that time all of Cortland and Onondaga Counties and all of Oswego west of a line drawn



ALL AND MEXICO HOUSE

north from the mouth of the Canaseraga Creek to Lake Ontario. The first town meeting was appointed to be held at the home of Benjamin Morehouse. Evidently this town organization was not fully completed, for we find that on February 26, 1796, the State Legislature granted a new charter to the town and this original charter is now in the possession of the Town Clerk of Mexico. Its boundaries are most interesting. It included all of Oswego County east of the Oswego River and north of Oneida River and Lake. It was bounded on the north by the Black River, Constable's Purchase and Oothout's purchase and on the east by the Canada Creek. It, therefore, included a large portion of the present counties of Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida and Herkimer. The first town meeting was appointed at John Meyer's house at Rotterdam. In the year 1828 the town was reduced to its present boundaries.

The first permanent settlers in the town of Mexico came in 1798 and 1799. Among these were Jonathan Parkhurst, Nathaniel Rood, Benjamin Wright, Reuben Hamilton, Captain Geerman, William Spencer and son, Sylvester Spencer, Chipman Wheadon, Calvin Tiffany, Phineas Davis, Miles Doolittle and Greene Clark. Many of the first settlers located on the lake shore at what they called Vera Cruz, at the present site of Mexico Point.

Scriba built a store at Vera Cruz and endeavored to make a harbor at that point; the territory was divided into lots in anticipation of the development of a large city. However, in the autumn of 1799 most of the first settlers lost their lives in a severe storm on the lake. They had gone to Canada for supplies and encountered the storm on their return. Among the surviving men of the settlement were Jonathan Parkhurst, Calvin Tiffany and Phineas Davis.



LEFT BUILT BY SHUBAL ALFRED

Scriba originally paid sixteen cents per acre for his land and later sold it as low as nine cents per acre; but on the advice of surveyors who reported how productive the soil was, the price of land increased to \$5 per acre. This high cost of land, together with the Vera Cruz calamity, hindered considerably the immigration to and early settlement of the town of Mexico.

In 1801 Samuel and William Cole, Asa Davis and John Morton came to the town of Mexico. In 1804 John Morton completed the first sawmill and also had a small run of stone in one corner of his mill where he could do custom grain grinding. The bolting was still done with a hair sieve. Morton's Mill was located on the site of the present mill operated by F. G. Ludington. People came from Scriba, and even from Oswego, to get their grinding done, bringing grist upon their backs and returning the same way.

The first white child born in the town of Mexico (August 9, 1799) was Truman Rood, a son of Nathaniel Rood. Because of this distinction he was given a farm by Mr. Scriba.

The first frame house was built by Shubal Alfred in 1807 and is standing at the present day. Its dimensions were 20 x 24 feet, being the wing of the dwelling now occupied by Frank Holley. Religious services were held in this house which was also used as the meeting place of the first Masonic Lodge. The barn which is situated in the rear, supplied Miss Harriet Eastman with a schoolroom in 1811, and it is said that sometimes the school children had to be moved from the main part of the barn to the stables, as the floor was needed for the threshing of grain.



After 1804 many settlers arrived, among the first of whom were Leonard Ames, Alfred Mathews, Joel Savage, Solomon Huntington, David and Joseph Lamb, Daniel Ames, Reuben Fay, Oliver Richardson, Bailey Morton, George Rickard, and a great many others.

Joel Savage is known as having served in the war for American Independence, having enlisted when nineteen years of age. The incident is told of him that at one time he was forced to run the gauntlet. "Running the gauntlet" meant running between two rows of armed Indians who aimed to wound, or kill, the prisoner as he ran through their lines. On many occasions, Mr. Savage was said to have exhibited great skill and bravery. He died at Vera Cruz in 1808 and was buried in the Primitive Cemetery. Captain Thomas Wheeler, David Lamb and Benjamin Howard were others who served in the Revolution and later lived in Mexico.

Probably our most illustrious patriot was Silas Towne, who was called to serve as a spy in the Revolution. Spy Island, the small island where he was buried, has been named for him. This property, located near the mouth of Salmon Creek and containing one acre of land, was conveyed by Hiram Parker and wife to trustees for the town of Mexico, September 25, 1871, by a deed recorded in the Oswego County Clerk's Office, Book 134, Page 28. At present the island is the property of the State of New York. The Daughters of the American Revolution, of Silas Towne Chapter, have the care of it. It was on this island that Towne hid to observe St. Leger with his soldiers and Indians as they traversed along the shore of the lake on their way to the central part of the state, where later the battle of Oriskany was fought. From his place of concealment he heard the plans of the



MOTOR CAR AND SUPPLY COMPANY'S GARAGE AND SALESROOM

British officers to attack Fort Stanwix. Waiting until the Redcoats, leaving by way of Oswego, had started, he took a short cut, reaching Fort Stanwix before the enemy, who met defeat in the battle of August 6, 1777. When Silas Towne Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, was organized, an appropriation was obtained from the State for the care of the island. This was expended under the supervision of the town. Since then the Daughters have made many improvements and have also erected a flag pole sixty feet high from which floats the Stars and Stripes.

During the first half of the nineteenth century the two most important highways in the county were the Plank Road from Rome to Oswego, and the old Salt Road which ran from Syracuse to the North country. These roads intersected each other at Union Square and were the principal avenues of travel east and west, and north and south.

Near the intersection of these roads was a settlement where resided some of the ablest, best educated and most responsible men of the town. It was natural that these men should labor for the prosperity of their particular settlement, and therefore it was thought good by them to secure in their midst the High School of the town. Already in 1819 (about a century back) the idea of a High School in connection with a graded school had been conceived by John Howard, a teacher in the Alfred District. The enterprise was accomplished in 1820 when one grand district having been formed by combining districts later known as Nos. 7, 8 and 9, with parts of seven others, a two-story brick building was erected on the site where now stands our Academy.

It was in the erection of this building that the memorable story of Captain Leonard Ames is told. The weather became intensely cold, the walls were up, but not roofed.



TREET, LOOKING WEST, SHOWING SHOE SHOP, BARBER SHOP
ND RESTAURANT ON THE LEFT

There was danger that all the toil and struggle of a year might come to naught. To meet the emergency Captain Ames called together men and boys, directing them to fell trees (then standing on the premises now occupied by George Blakeslee). The logs were hauled with oxen while the limbs were piled upon sledges, or carried on shoulders, to the front of the building. From this supply, day after day, and night after night, a fire was kept burning in the center of the building. Until the walls were dry, the voice of Captain Ames encouraged the workers, "Boys, whenever the fire burns low, roll in more logs — pile on more limbs". The building was soon completed, each of the two stories containing a single room. John Howard was installed as teacher of the High School, while Laura Fish had charge of the other department. Before the first year was ended, people began calling it the "Academy". This was in 1820.

At the first meeting of the Board of Trustees, who represented both Prattville and Mexico, June 10, 1826, it was determined to build a house of brick on a site midway between the two villages. In the following year they voted that the site for the Academy be removed to the vicinity of Judge Pratt's. Gradually Prattville became the more powerful.

But in the fall of 1826, Mexico permitted the Prattville Corporation to open school in its own cherished brick building with M. W. Southworth as principal and Miss Carrie Benham as preceptress. Rensselaer Oswego Academy became the incorporated name.

VanRensselaer, the great land owner, was expected in return for the compliment, to contribute to the necessary funds. This expectation failing, with business on the cross roads surely decreasing, the Prattville people gave over to Mexico the control of the institution they had founded, but had not now the power to remove.



ACADEMY AND HIGH SCHOOL

The name was changed to "Mexico Academy" by act of the Legislature in 1845. Previous to this, in 1836, a wooden structure, three stories high, was reared in front of, and adjoining the brick building, the latter being divided into dormitories.

This structure remained until 1855 when the brick portion was torn down and the wooden frame, after having the lower story cut away, was removed to serve as Miller's Carriage Factory. Then was erected and equipped the present brick building.

In 1893 the addition of a military system of discipline was adopted under the inspection of the War Department with instruction in military tactics given by Colonel Richards, an officer of the United States Army.

In 1895, in deference to the present educational system of the State, which favors schools under public control, rather than those supported by private funds, the village schools of Mexico were combined with the Academy into an Academic Union School.

In 1912 our High School received the addition of an Agricultural Department which is in session the year round, the winter being given to theoretical work, while the summer is given to that of a practical and experimental nature on private farms. An instructor has supervision also during the summer months.

In connection with this, it is interesting to note the brief record of an effort along the line of agricultural instruction, made in 1833, when some fifteen acres nearly opposite the Academy were contracted for, ten of which were plowed and planted. The first year, the crop of corn was said to be fair, but with the second year the experiment ceased.

Our village stands on ground which was formerly the site of large and productive farms. The part lying east of Salmon Creek, was largely owned by Peter Chandler,



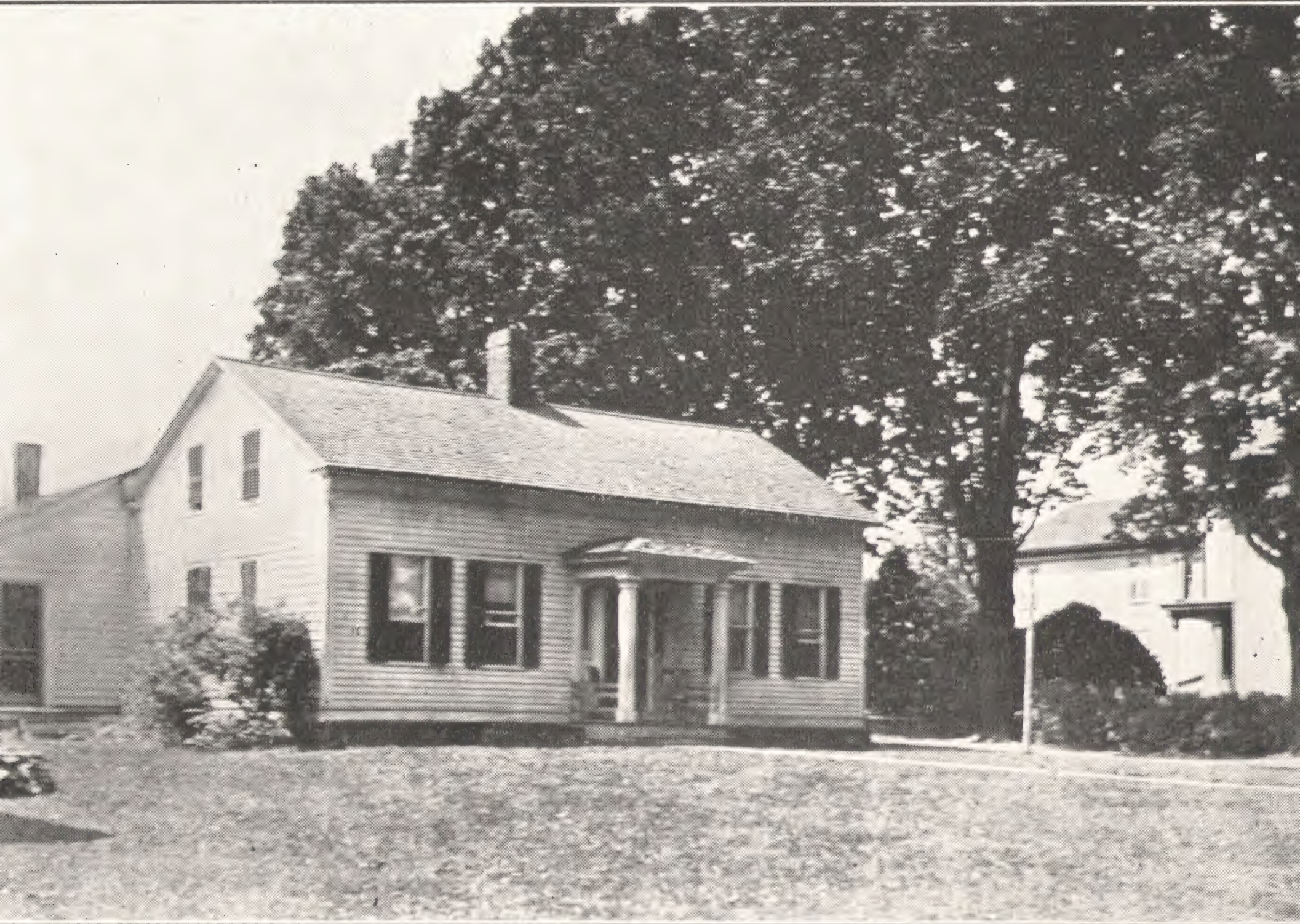
MEXICO'S WINTER "BUS"

Phineas Davis, Sr., and Dr. Snell. The part south of Main Street, through which Church, South Jefferson and Washington Streets run, was known as the Butler Farm, while the portion north of Main Street from Boyd House and Webb Block, northerly to railroad depot, was the large farm of John Ames, and afterwards owned by Calvin Goodwin and Benjamin E. Bowen. A large portion west of Black Creek, originally comprised the farms of John Howard, Leonard Ames, Sr., Veeder Green, Shubal Alfred, Norman Jones and Orson Ames.

The incorporation date of the Village of Mexico was January 15, 1851. The first Village Board was O. H. Whitney, Dr. Clark D. Snell, James S. Chandler, David Goit and Asa Sprague. The first Village Treasurer was Seabury A. Tullar; Clerk, Cyrus Whitney; Assessors, Ezra C. Mitchell and R. L. Alfred; Collector, John A. Fort, and Poundmaster, Grandus Gregory.

It was not until 1865 that the Village of Mexico was connected by rail with the outside world. The first regular passenger train went through on the first day of January, 1866. The service of the village "bus" dates back to the beginning of the regular train service, when Burroughs Penfield took up the route to and from the station, continuing the same, some thirty years.

During the Civil War, Mexico was one of the largest stations of the "underground railroad," for running off fugitive slaves to Canada or to some other place of safety. Here was located one of the lodges of that secret organization known as the Anti-Man-Hunting League.



ANCE OF ORSON AMES AS IT NOW STANDS

A decade or more before the war, Mexico showed its sympathy for the negro by protecting the fugitive Jerry, after his rescue from the Federal officers in Syracuse. Jerry's was a test case, it is said, to prove whether or not the Fugitive Slave Law could be enforced in this State. While sheriffs and marshals were watching all the lake ports between Buffalo and Ogdensburg, poor Jerry was hiding in this village.

The story runs like this: Caleb Davis drove out into the country one evening to collect beef, as was his custom. He stopped at the Syracuse House for a cigar and drove on without exciting suspicion, but in the bottom of the cart covered with sacks lay Jerry armed and anxious. The team was a span of fleet horses furnished by Ex-Mayor Jason C. Woodruff, a Hunker Democrat. James Davis, on horseback and disguised as a negro, rode out twelve miles to see and instruct the tollgate keepers. Jason S. Hoyt also joined the party later. The "patriots" were soon on their track, but when the pursuers reached the tollgates, they had great difficulty in arousing the gate-keepers who consumed much time in making change. At Brewerton Bridge, Jason Hoyt was left to drive on to Mexico alone with Jerry. After this the pursuers gained on them and for seven miles they raced with the horses at the utmost speed consistent with safety, until Hoyt's team left them so far behind that they gave up the chase. Following the route of the "underground railway" Jerry was taken as far as Mexico the first night and left in charge of Starr Clark, Orson Ames and Solomon Peck. The first day and night he was kept at the home of Orson Ames, who then resided in the house still standing opposite the Academy, known as the Whyburn Place and now occupied by Frederick L. Kellogg. Mr. Ames, fearful he could not safely secret Jerry longer at his place, took him to Asa Beebe's barn, very



BB BLOCK ON NORTH SIDE OF MAIN STREET

near the later site of the Earle Butterdish Factory. In this barn he was kept for about two weeks. Mrs. Beebe provided his rations, which to avoid suspicion, her son, Windson, carried to him in a bushel basket when he went to care for his team. In the meantime, a brother of Mr. Ames, residing in Oswego, made arrangements with a captain of a boat to take Jerry to Canada. When the arrangements were completed Windson Beebe went to Oswego for a load of wheat (he then ran the Railroad Mills), and having secreted Jerry among the bags and blankets, delivered him before daylight to the "agent" in Oswego who smuggled him on board the schooner that was waiting in the harbor. Jerry in due time reached Kingston, in the "land of the free." The Canadian climate proved too cold for Jerry, and he sickened, and died October 8, 1853, and was buried in a cemetery near Kingston.

Of the Civil War veterans who have at some time resided in the town of Mexico, the list numbers 231. The Melzar Richards Post of the G. A. R. was organized in the year 1883.

Since early in 1861, the events of the town have been recorded in our village paper, The Mexico Independent, which has promptly appeared on every publication day. Herein our joys and our sorrows have been related, while scant space, it may be, has been allowed our quarrels and dissensions.

The number of fires this paper has had to report is astonishing. And had the publication started earlier, it would have had the same sad news to tell. Even in 1864 insurance agents called the disaster of that year, "Mexico's Fourteenth Annual Conflagration." But long before insurance companies were interested in us, the log houses took to flames.



IST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, MEXICO, N. Y.

The first record is of Calvin Tiffany's log house burning in 1801. A singular instance occurred in 1824, when Mr. Fox (this is not a fable) moving from one house found the place he was going to in flames. Without unloading his goods he returned to find the other burning. He then left the country.

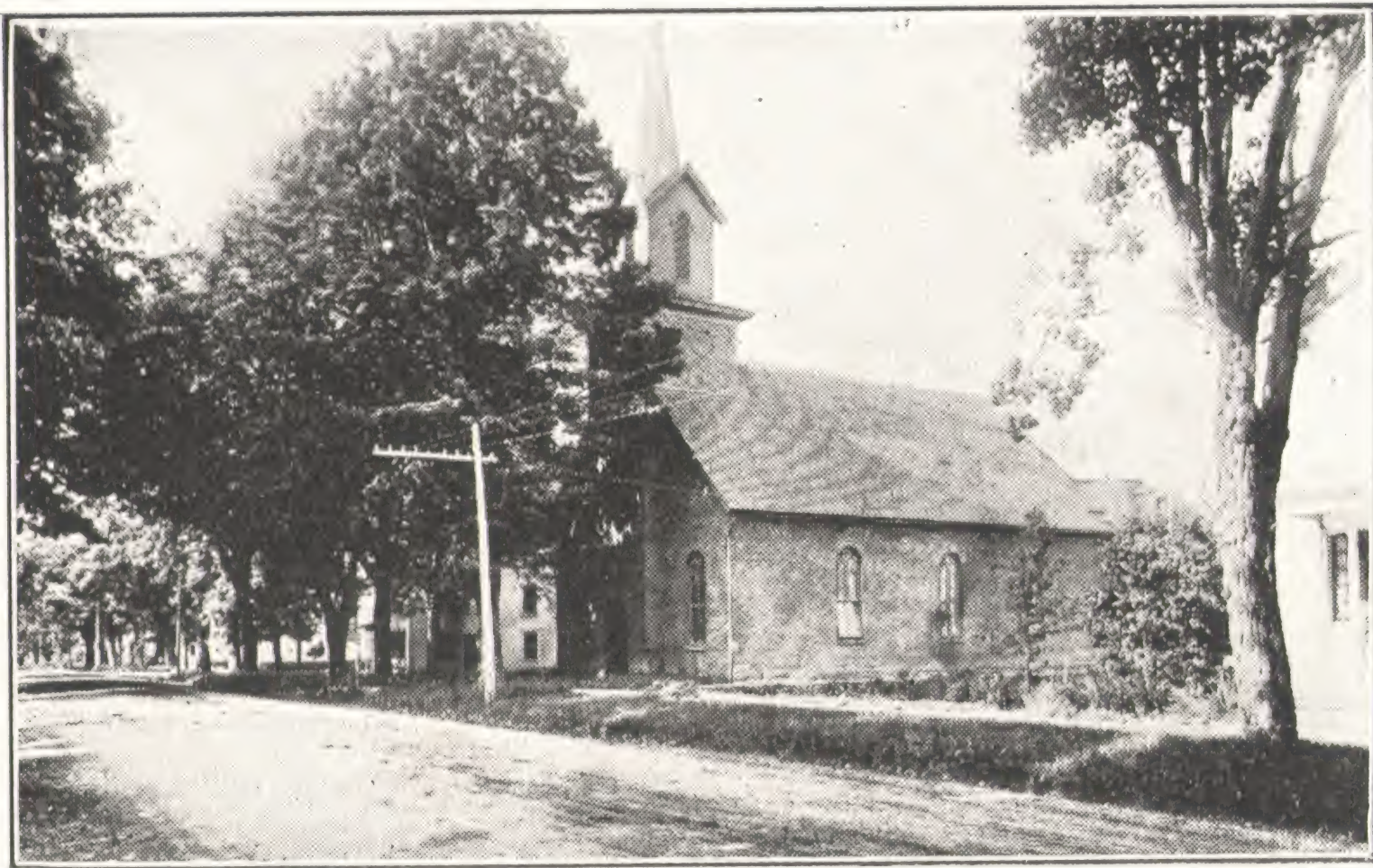
The greatest conflagration in the history of Mexico, known as the "Great Fire," occurred in 1864, entailing a loss of about \$67,000.00. The fire occurred on an afternoon in July, originating in the drug and book store of Snell & Huntington, from an explosion which happened as the clerk was drawing naphtha. In two hours nearly all the business portion in the south side of Main Street was reduced to ashes. This included seventeen buildings, from Dr. Snell's brick office (now occupied by Mrs. Laura Evarts' millinery store) to Water Street, and also two houses on East Hill. Burnt embers were carried on the wind as far as the town of Albion, while half burnt postal currency and law papers from Whitney & Skinner's law office were found in Union Square. One engine and a suction pump, located at Toronto Mills, were the firemen's only weapons. Compared with this limited fire protection, it is pleasant to contemplate the present protection afforded by our municipal water system installed in 1913-14.

Mexico has five congregations which assemble for worship. The Methodists of this village were organized as a class about 1808, when they assembled at the home of Leonard Ames. In 1833 a brick building was erected in Main Street. In 1851 this burned and the following year the present edifice was erected.

The original Presbyterian Society of Mexico was organized in 1810, the meeting place being Shubal Alfred's barn. In 1829 a meeting-house was built, and on February



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MEXICO, N. Y.



BAPTIST CHURCH, MEXICO, N. Y.



GRACE CHURCH, MEXICO, N. Y.

24, 1830, the society was instituted as the First Presbyterian Church of Mexicoville. In 1859 the church edifice was enlarged and remodeled.

The First Baptist Society was organized as the Baptist Church of Mexicoville, January 24, 1832, by Rev. Jonathan Goodwin, who came to this town from Connecticut in 1829. The church edifice was rebuilt of brick in 1872.

In 1830 members of the Episcopal Communion were residing in Mexico. In 1848 a parish was organized and services were then first held here. On June 22, 1870, the cornerstone of Grace Church was laid by the Right Rev. F. D. Huntington, Bishop of Central New York.

Members of the Roman Catholic Church residing in Mexico have held service at different places and have also worshipped in the church on French Street, in the southeastern part of the town, which building was erected about 1848. In 1914 plans were made for the erection of a church building in the Village of Mexico.

Why the name Mexico was thought of, or what circumstances suggested it, for this town, is not recorded. That Mr. Scriba who named the townships of his "Patent" should have chosen names from his native land of Holland, seems most natural. We thus find him giving to his newly chosen place of residence (though, to be sure, he lived in a log house), the celebrated name (New) Rotterdam, while among his other names, we find the Dutch Delft and Breda, also Mentz and Strasburg. Fredericksburg (now a portion of Oswego City) was named for his son Frederick. Of still other townships we are told that they received names of proprietors that are known only in deeds. But not thus may we account for the name of the first township, Mexico.



SCENE ON MAIN STREET



WINTER SCENE ON SOUTH JEFFERSON STREET

If Mr. Scriba, wishing to establish an important port on Lake Ontario, already had in mind the gigantic town of Mexico, the name of Vera Cruz, a chief seaport of Old Mexico, might naturally have followed.

Of one of the townships we are told that although the residents greatly desired the name Boston, the Legislators insisted on giving honor, then and there, to the ambitious pioneer and thus incorporated the town as Scriba. When by act of Legislature our own name was settled upon us, Mr. Scriba's choice evidently met with official approval. Therefore we still retained the name that had been spoken in an earlier day in the "mists of romance."



LOCK ON SOUTH SIDE OF MAIN STREET

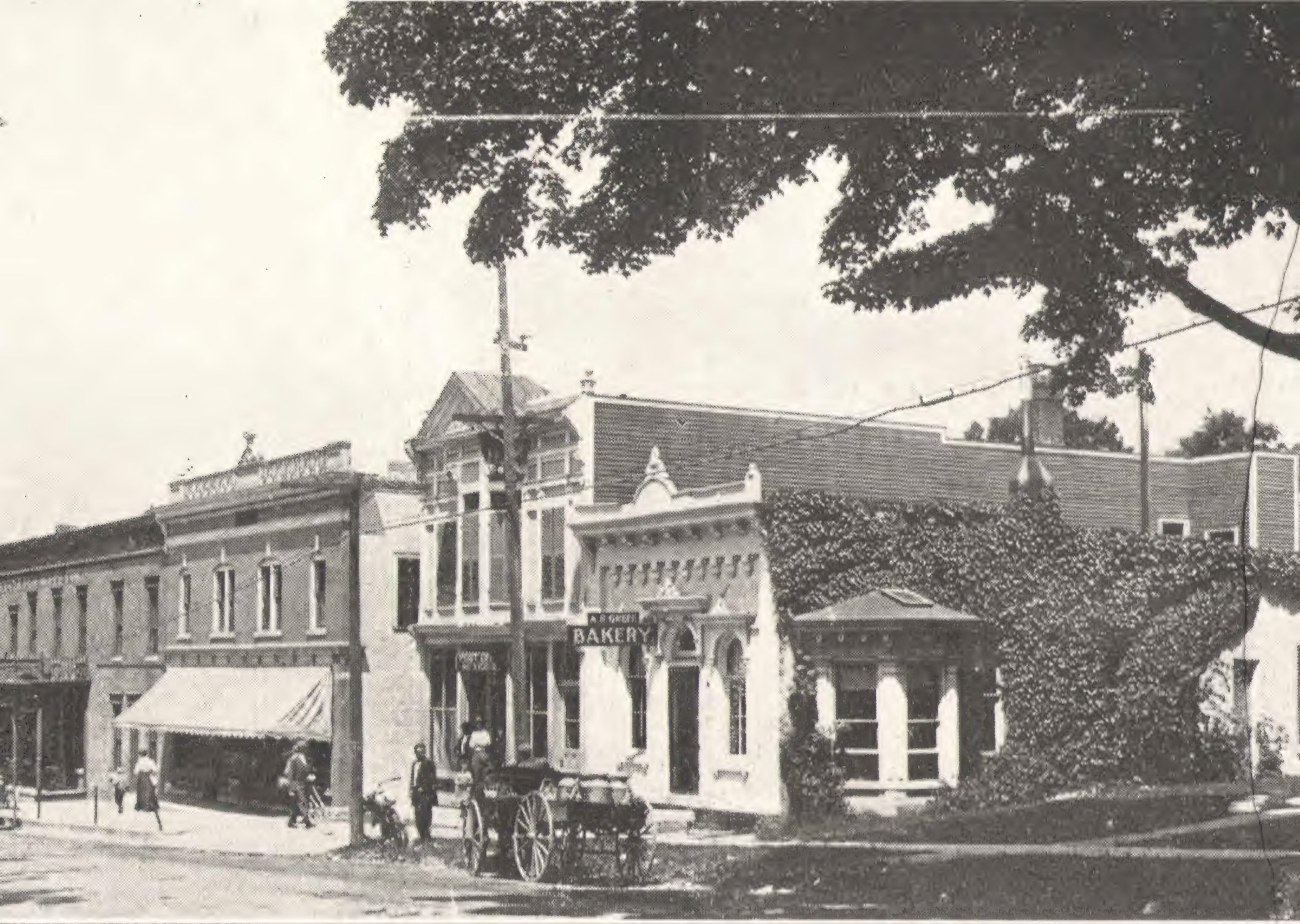


STANDPIPE ON EAST HILL

It is interesting to note, as to our cognomen, that it is of Indian origin. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the name Mexico is connected with the name of the group of American Tribes calling themselves Mexica, or Azteca. The word is related to, or derived from, the name of the Mexican national war-god, Mexitl, and was given by the Spanish conquerors to the group of countries, over which the Aztec power more or less prevailed, at the time of the European Invasion.

Outside the old republic and these United States, we find no place bearing the name of Mexico, excepting the Island of Haiti, where are the "Mountains of Mexico."

Within our own borders, not forgetting New Mexico, which, in becoming a State, has given dignity to the name, we find six other States, each sheltering a Mexico. Probably the oldest of these and certainly the one holding prior claim to our attention and respect, is the Mexico of the Empire State —*it is our home.*



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